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Stolen Centuries

by

Otis Adelbert Kline

Bleary-eyed and unkempt, with a three days' growth of beard covering his lean jowls, his threadbare suit unpressed and baggy, Fred "Fly" Jorgeson shuffled to the park bench, sat down heavily, and sighed dejectedly.

Jorgeson had seen better days--much better. For years he had made a splendid living with his "Human Fly" act, climbing the sides of skyscrapers as an advertising stunt while crowds gaped, watching for him to fall.

He had never fallen, but others of his profession had, and finally the authorities everywhere had prohibited such exhibitions. No more Human Fly acts would be permitted. Ergo, Fly Jorgeson, as he was called everywhere, was suddenly without the highly paid jobs and the adulation of the crowds which had been the breath of life to him.

He had never saved his money, had learned no other trade or profession, and with millions of trained men jobless, he found it impossible to get work. He soon found himself flat broke. He then took to panhandling, usually getting enough nickels and dimes in a day for his food and a cheap flop. His last dime was now gone. Soon he must leave the languid comfort of the park bench and resume his panhandling, in order to obtain the food and the flophouse bunk that would see him through the night.

A discarded newspaper lay on the bench beside him, and picking it up, he glanced idly through the "Help

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newspaper lay on the bench beside him, and picking it up, he glanced idly through the "Help Wanted" columns of the classified section. Suddenly, a small ad caught and held his attention:

WANTED: Experienced mountain climber. Easy work. Excellent pay. Applicants call in person, 1332 Poinsetta Drive, and ask for Professor Hartwell.

Jorgeson frowned and considered. That address would be at least a five mile walk from where he sat. But didn't he walk a good fifteen to twenty miles a day, anyway? And the panhandling might even be better out Poinsetta way, whether he landed the job or not.

He tore the ad from the paper, thrust it

into his coat pocket, lurched to his feet, and slouched off on his way.

1332 Poinsetta Drive was a typical California bungalow, set in a spacious grounds, dotted with trees and surrounded by a high, woven wire fence.

Jorgeson stood for a moment, peering through the wire meshes of the gate, trying to gather courage to enter. He was painfully conscious of his unshaven, unkempt appearance. For a moment, he was tempted to turn away and give up the quest.

Then he saw a white-haired, bespectacled man of about his own size and build emerge from a side door and walk out into the yard. He made a queer, clucking noise, and a squirrel came

scampering down the nearest tree, then ran toward him and halted with bushy tail arched.

The man produced an acorn from a bulging coat pocket, and handed it to the squirrel, which sat there on its haunches, nibbling and jerking its tail. It was soon followed by another and another, until no less than a dozen squirrels surrounded the old man.

This sight decided Jorgeson. Undoubtedly, this was Professor Hartwell. A man who was kind to animals would also be likely to be kind to a fellow human being in distress. The Fly opened the gate and entered. The squirrels scampered away at his approach. The old man rose to his feet,

rattling the acorns in his pocket as he appraised the Fly with keen gray eyes that looked out through his gold-rimmed glasses from beneath bushy white brows.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he asked crisply.

"I've come in answer to your ad in today's paper," Jorgeson replied.

"You are an experienced mountain climber?" the old man asked.

"I can climb anything that's climbable," Jorgeson responded.

The professor considered, stroking his chin as he looked the Fly over from head to foot.

"Hm-m. Your appearance isn't particularly prepossessing--but you're my only applicant, thus far. There must

be a dearth of unemployed mountain climbers in these parts. Are you strong?"

"My muscles are still hard, and my wind is still good. Feel."

Jorgeson flexed a biceps, and the professor thumbed it for a moment. Then he poked his back, leg and abdominal muscles.

"Pretty fair, at that," he said. "I guess you'll be able to make it. You are hired for two days. The pay, when you've completed the job, will be one thousand dollars. Satisfactory?" Jorgeson gulped in surprise, and nodded, too astounded for words.

"Good. Then come with me. I'll fix you up with a shave, a bath, a square meal, and some clothing and shoes. You

and I are about the same size, and I believe my spare outfit will fit you. Come along." Jorgeson followed the professor into the house, and through a long room that was fitted up as a laboratory, with an imposing array of test tubes, microscopes, cages of fruit flies, guinea pigs, and the usual paraphernalia of the biochemist, then down a hallway and into a tiled bathroom. An hour later, bathed, shaved, fed and wearing a pair of his employer's whipcords, with high-laced, hobnailed boots, flannel shirt, and leather windbreaker, the Fly felt like a new man as he helped the professor load the luggage into the tonneau of a large, powerful sedan.

They sped away, heading for the mountains. Jorgeson grew quite curious about this mysterious trip. However, the professor was not communicative. Presently they turned off the paved highway, and took to a rutted dirt road, which circled steeply upward through the trees. This was succeeded after several miles by a little used "stump" road cut through the timber.

This road came to a sudden end at the base of a steep cliff, which was almost perpendicular. The professor climbed out stiffly, and Jorgeson got out on his side, flexing his muscles, numbed by the long ride.

"Think you can climb that with a load on your back?" asked the professor,

nodding toward the cliff.

"For me, climbing that will be like taking candy from a baby," the Fly replied, with a grin.

"Good. We'll camp here for the night, then tackle it the first thing in the morning. But now we eat." Jorgeson's eyes bulged as he turned and saw the elaborate array of cans, parcels and bottles the professor was setting out on the checkered oil cloth he had spread on the ground. The old man, noting his look of astonishment, smiled slightly.

"This is to be my last dinner for a long time. Also, it is a celebration of the culmination of a lifetime of labor and research."

"Looks like a banquet, to me," said the

Fly.

"Let us make it a banquet--for two," the professor replied. "We'll eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow--" he paused for a moment, as if he had been about to say something he wished to conceal--"for tomorrow we part forever!" he finished.

Jorgeson joined in the preparations with gusto--and in the feast that followed. They washed down their caviar and anchovies with a fifth of sherry. Their green turtle soup with a quart of sauterne. A bottle of Burgundy blended perfectly with their thick steaks, smothered in mushrooms. And another of Pedro Domigue, 1882, flamed blue above their crepes suzettes and topped

off their cafe cognac. The Fly was in a roseate glow. The professor grew talkative, even boastful.

"I suppose you've been wondering what all this is about, Jorgeson," he said. "Wasn't going to tell you at first, but hell, you're a good fellow, and have turned out to be a real pal, helping me celebrate and everything, so why shouldn't I tell you? I've got everything fixed, so there's nothing you or anyone else can do about it, anyhow." The professor paused, drew a deep breath.

"Do you realize that you are the last man I am going to s e e for three centuries! Picture that, Jorgeson. In three hundred years I'll be alive, just a s I am today, ready to step into a new world--

the hero of the hour--with historical knowledge that will have been long forgotten." The Fly looked at him skeptically, as he mixed himself another coffee and brandy, half and half.

"I see you don't believe me," said the professor, reaching for the brandy bottle as Jorgeson put it down.

"But it's a fact, nevertheless."

He took a small leather case from his breast pocket. Opening it, he revealed a hypodermic syringe on one side, a small brown bottle on the other.

"See that bottle?" he asked. "Elixir of life, that's what it is. Temporary immortality in a bottle. Tomorrow I'll shoot that into my arm--go to sleep for three centuries, and wake up, alive and

well."

"How do you know you can do all this?" asked Jorgeson, interested in spite of his skepticism.

"Experiments. Thousands of them. Mediterranean fruit flies, guinea pigs, monkeys, white mice. Proper dosage puts any of them into a state of suspended animation for four of their normal lifetimes. And they wake up at the proper time--depending on the dosage and the weight of the animal--carrying on from where they left off, and living out the balance of their lives as if nothing had happened. Talk about Rip Van Winkle! What was supposed to happen to him could really happen to anyone--except the aging process--with

my serum."

But how do you know what might happen to your body while you're sleeping? Cold, storms, attacks of animals--how can you survive these?"

"Simple. All taken care of. I've got a vault all built--airtight, insulated against outside temperatures, prevents dehydration, freezing or overheating. Air conditioning apparatus that will start up as soon as I move and have to breathe again. Man, didn't I tell you I've been preparing this for a lifetime?"

"But how will you be able to get out of the vault? I suppose there will be a thick, heavy door. What if you are too weak to move it when you awaken?"

"Just a matter of perfect timing. The

door will open automatically at the right time. In fact, I've made it so it can't be opened any other way--to keep out possible vandals. Know anything about the equinoxes?" The Fly harked back. After all, he had had an education.

"Very little. Studied it in school. They shift periodically, don't they?"

"Precisely. And what effect does that have on the stars in the northern heavens? Right now, Polaris is the North Star. But do you know that about in the year B. C. 3,000, Alpha Draconis was the polestar, and that some 12,000 years from now Vega will occupy that position?"

"Man, the movements of the Earth around the sun and on its axis, despite

the slight polar wobble, can be more safely depended on over a period of years, than the most precise and efficient instruments invented by man." "But, I don't see--"

"I'll explain. I've a tube shaped like a telescope trained on the northern sky in a certain direction. Beneath it, is a composite and extremely complicated device of my own invention, protected by a small dome of quartz, and operating like a photoelectric cell, but with this difference. It doesn't respond every time light strikes it. There must be a special combination of light rays--a combination of certain pinpoints of light, in short, agreeing precisely, not with the stars which are shining in that tube tonight, but

with those which will shine into it three centuries hence, when the Earth has shifted its position relative to the sidereal system."

"And then what happens?"

"Simple enough. It will work just like the time lock on a safe. The mechanism for opening the door is set in motion--the door swings open."

"Not so simple," the Fly disagreed. "What if it should be a cloudy night?"

"That's provided for also. There will be enough food, water and air in the vault to last ninety days. The chances are millions to one that there will be at least one clear night during that period. And only one will be required for my purpose."

At this point, Jorgeson noted that the professor's head was beginning to nod. A moment later, he rose, mumbling something about bedtime, and retired to his mattress.

For a long time the Fly lay awake, looking up at the gleaming stars, and thinking. If only he could get that bottle of serum--immure himself in the vault. He was a misfit in this generation. All of his chances had vanished. True, he would have a thousand dollars tomorrow, but he knew himself too well to believe he would have it long. There would be a spree of spending, and within a month at the most he would be back on the street panhandling.

But if he could wake up in a new

world three centuries hence--a world in which he could emerge as a hero, the center of attraction, the wonder of all time, a man who had remained in a state of suspended animation for three centuries--what a chance there would be for him to live as he had lived in the good old days--or even better.

As for that old codger snoring across from him, what good would it do him to traverse the gap of three centuries? Why, he must be at least sixty-five years old--with one foot in the grave. He would totter into it a few years after he woke up. But the Fly, a man of thirty, could look forward to perhaps a half century of life. Thinking along these lines, and trying to evolve some scheme that would

enable him to take the place of the professor, he presently fell asleep.

Jorgeson woke with a hangover. The professor, however, showed no signs of his celebration; he was as businesslike and taciturn as if nothing had happened. He dosed the Fly with aspirin and black coffee, and, after they had had their bacon and eggs, they loaded the equipment which the professor wished to move up to his vault, on their backs. They bound themselves together with a twenty-foot length of rope, and taking up their alpenstocks, began their climb up the steep slope.

To the Fly, accustomed to supporting himself for long stretches on the side of a building, the climb was ridiculously

easy. The professor, though surprisingly strong and agile for an old man, could not have made it without help.

After a climb that took them well into midmorning, they reached a ledge about two feet in width. Above this ledge, the cliff towered, as sheer and straight as the side of a building, for about a hundred feet. The Fly wondered how he was going to be able to get the old man up that wall. Then he noticed a knotted rope with a hook at the end, dangling within easy reach from the top of the cliff. The professor unstrapped his pack and lowered it to the ledge. Then he fastened it to the hook in the end of the rope, and went up, hand over hand, with surprising ease for a man of his age. Jorgeson

decided that he must have made this trip many times before--perhaps alone, perhaps with others to accompany him as far as the ledge. Obviously, he must have moved a great many heavy things to the cliff top during the time when he was building his vault.

Tilting his head far back, the Fly saw the old man crawl over the edge of the cliff. A moment later, he began pulling up the pack he had hooked on the end of the rope. Once he had it on the cliff top, he dropped the rope again.

"Take off your pack and fasten it on the hook," he ordered.

Jorgeson complied, and watched Hartwell draw up the second pack. To the surprise of the Fly, he did not drop

the rope again. Instead, he held a leather wallet out over the edge and dropping it, said:

"Catch."

The Fly caught it, and opening it, found within ten crisp one hundred dollar bills. He looked up, and saw that the old man was watching him.

"Your job is over, and that's your pay," he said. "From here, I carry on alone. You know something I had intended no man of this generation to know. But, before anyone can get here, I'll be sealed in my vault, which is well-camouflaged. I wouldn't advise you to try to find it. And don't try to drive the car back to town. I smashed the carburetor, this morning. Take it off,

walk back to town, and buy a new one. Then you can come back and drive the car away. It is yours, with everything in it." He drew back out of sight without a word of farewell, and Jorgeson, after standing and staring until his neck ached, realized that he had gone for good. What should he do now? Should he return to his world, the owner of a car and a thousand dollars, to tell a strange, incredible story which no one would believe?

Or should he try to steal this coveted spanning of the centuries for himself?

A crafty gleam came into his eyes. He was glad, now, that he had not told the old man he was the Human Fly. The old buzzard might have taken other

precautions. But he would never suspect that he could climb that cliff with ease.

Fifteen minutes later, the Fly was peering cautiously above the edge of the cliff. The coil of knotted rope was lying where the old man had left it, but the two packs were gone, and the professor was not in sight. The Fly found himself on a flat-topped pinnacle, strewn with boulders, and cut by arroyos in which sparse vegetation grew. The professor had chosen well in selecting this retreat. No plane could land here, and no ordinary mountain climber would be likely to negotiate the steep cliffs that surrounded the pinnacle. Only a Human Fly could make it without the aid of a rope or a long ladder. A brief search

revealed a well-defined path. He followed it quietly and cautiously. Presently, he heard the sound of hammering just ahead of him. He parted the bushes and peered through. There before him was the professor, standing in front of the open door of his vault, knocking the crate from a machine which, a moment later, he carried inside and bolted in place. The machine in place, the professor took the leather case from his pocket, and from it removed the syringe and bottle of serum. He filled the syringe, then began to roll up his sleeve. It was now or never for Jorgeson. Catching up a heavy stone, he bounded noiselessly forward. The old man turned, apparently about to close the

vault door before injecting the serum. He caught sight of his assailant for an instant--then the heavy rock came down on his skull crushing it like an eggshell. The Fly snatched the syringe as Hartwell slumped to the floor, dead.

Flinging the rock out into the bushes, he grasped the old man's collar, and dragged the limp body out through the door. For a moment, he thought of burying it. Then he remembered that this would take time, and that the professor had told him everything had been timed, almost to the minute. He must close the door and take the serum now if he wished to wake up at the proper time. It should affect him exactly as it would have the professor, because he was of

the same size and build, and almost the same weight. He sprang inside the vault and swung the heavy door shut after him. The locking bars fell into place. There was, he observed, a porthole in the north side, filled with heavy glass to admit light only. The unlocking mechanism was invisible to him--must be fastened somewhere outside--would have to be, as a matter of fact, to catch the starlight.

For a moment panic seized him as he realized that the mechanism would not open the door for three hundred years. He rushed to the door, wrenched at the handle, determined to give up the whole idea, and flee. But it would not budge. The professor had told the truth. It could only be opened by the mechanism. And it

would not open for three hundred years. He had to take the serum, now, or die like a rat in a trap.

There was a low cot at the back of the room. He sat down on this and bared his arm. Then he closed his eyes, inserted the needle, and sent the plunger home. His head reeled dizzily as he flung the empty syringe from him and sank back on the cot. Then came oblivion.

G RADUALLY, consciousness returned to Jorgeson. He opened his eyes and looked about him for a moment before he remembered where he was. It did not seem that more than five minutes had elapsed since he had sunk back upon the cot, unconscious. That serum was a fraud. But was it?

By the reflected sunlight that came through the porthole, he was able to see everything in the room, even though he was so weak he could scarcely lift his hand. Presently, he moved an arm, raised it above his head. Something gray and fluffy fell away from it--something which had once been a woolen sleeve, but now was nothing but dust and lint.

He raised a foot. The remains of his whipcord trousers floated away in the tiny air current the movement had caused. The high-laced boot crumbled to powder.

Presently, he managed to sit up, and found himself as naked as the day he was born. The bedding on the cot had turned to dust and lint. Only the seasoned

wooden frame and slats remained. Even the springs had rusted completely away.

He staggered to his feet and made his way to the provision compartments. Eagerly he gulped water--then broke the seal of a food jar and filled his empty stomach.

Having drunk and eaten, he felt stronger. It was true! It was true! He had survived for three centuries. The professor had planned well, and he was to reap the fruits of that endless planning and toil. Soon the stars would open the door for him and he could walk out into a strange, new world. He went to the porthole and looked out. To his surprise, he was unable to see the northern sky. Yet it had been plainly visible through

the porthole when he had first entered the cave. Instead of the sky, he now saw a solid mass of rustling leaves--oak leaves.

Why, what could this mean? There had been no oak tree there when he went to sleep. Standing on tiptoe, he peered downward. Yes, a mighty oak stood there, rooted before the door. And the scattered remains of a human skeleton lay among its gnarled roots.

A human skull grinned up at him--a skull that had been crushed in on one side. It was the skull of Professor Hartwell grinning up at him! Why was it grinning? Well, all skulls grinned. But this one had a particularly malicious grin--as if some dark secret were about

to be revealed. What was this secret?

Obviously, oak trees came from acorns. And the professor, he remembered, habitually carried acorns in his pockets--for the squirrels. So, by throwing the body of the professor in front of the door, he, himself, had planted the oak tree. The body had protected and fertilized the sprouting acorn. But what of that? Something in the back of Jorgeson's mind seemed to be trying to get a message through--a warning of impending disaster.

Then, suddenly, he knew.

The oak tree standing there meant his doom. No starlight could penetrate through those thick leaves in the right combination to open the door of the

vault. He could not open it himself. And he could not get out through the small, eight-inch porthole.

He had exactly ninety days to live--ninety days of hell. Never would he be able to see the new world of his hopes and dreams.

He picked up the food jar he had just emptied and shattered it on the floor. Then, taking up a jagged fragment, he slashed his wrists, and watched his life blood drip on the floor until consciousness left him once more--but this time forever.

THE END